

CATEGORY: Technology Transfer

Chapter 2

The Transition of Virginia Master Gardener Volunteer Management

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ADDITIONAL INDEX WORDS: Leadership Development, Extension

SUMMARY

Management changes brought about by 1996 budgetary action shifted local MG program management from state-funded local agents to a structure of coordinators consisting of locally funded agents, locally funded non-agent coordinators, or volunteers willing to take on additional responsibilities. Virginia Cooperative Extension's (VCE) Master Gardener volunteer program is currently available in 76 unit offices. The unit programs are managed by 46 MG coordinators, including 8 locally funded agents, 8 locally funded technicians, and 30 volunteers. Currently, there are 2747 MG volunteers (trainees, interns, and MGs).

In order to provide consistent, state-level direction and leadership to this less experienced group of local coordinators and to prepare them for their jobs as MG program managers, current management materials were extensively revised and expanded and new resources were developed. These efforts to ensure that everyone understood the purpose and focus of the VCE MG program resulted in: ● revision of MG program policies; ● development of new volunteer management materials, VCE publication 426-699 *Welcome to Virginia Master Gardening! Guide to Educational Programming and Resource and Reference Guide*; ● establishment of a MG planning and work team; ● new management guidelines, the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual*; ● in-service training for coordinators; ● an administrative website at

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<http://www.ext.vt.edu/vce/specialty/envirohort/mastergard/master.html>; ● the VCE-MGC electronic discussion “listserv” specifically for direct communication with coordinators; ● and the *Virginia Master Gardener Leadership Development Newsletter*, the state MG newsletter refocused on the role of Master Gardeners as community leaders and educators.

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in 1972 by Dr. David Gibby of Washington state, the Master Gardener (MG) program has spread to more than 45 states and Canadian provinces (Price, 1997). MG programs are managed in a variety of ways. The majority of states, like Pennsylvania and Florida, have evolved an organizational structure that involves the state Extension horticulture specialist, a state coordinator, and a series of local program managers, typically horticulture agents. Other state MG programs consist of one or more counties within a state that are managed by the local Extension agent and are operated independently (Bradshaw, 1997).

VIRGINIA MG MANAGEMENT

Prior to 1996, Virginia MG program management was very similar to others reported in Bradshaw’s survey (1997). A state Extension specialist and paid state coordinator provided support (largely resource materials) to local Extension agents who managed the MG programs with a degree of autonomy. Most states recognize that individual county or unit MG programs need “latitude to design programs to meet their specific needs”(Ruppert et al, 1997). This leads to a certain degree of autonomy at the local level, although “state leadership is necessary to provide continuity, communication, and resource maximization” (Ruppert et al, 1997). At this time, state-funded Extension agents, primarily Consumer Horticulture agents but also some Agriculture and 4-H agents, entirely managed local MG programs or delegated responsibilities to established MGs. Often, MG volunteer managers did not have clear knowledge of VCE’s educational mission, the role of the Extension agent, or of their purpose as volunteers recruited to assist VCE meet its goals.

Major MG program management changes were brought about in 1996 by state budgetary action. In an e-mail memo from then-Associate Director of Agriculture and Natural Resources (Jones, 1996), it was stated that “in response to guidelines and guidance from the Executive Branch, VCE has developed a plan to eliminate the use of state funds to support the Master Gardener program, effective July 1, 1996.” It was stated that “VCE will continue to utilize the experience and expertise of MG to provide appropriate educational programs to their communities ... (however) The training and management of Master Gardener volunteers cannot be conducted by VCE staff funded with state tax dollars” (Jones, 1996). Therefore, in 1996, all MG management shifted to a structure of local MG coordinators consisting of locally funded agents, locally funded non-agent coordinators, or volunteers willing to take on additional responsibilities.

Although specific reasons for these changes were not given, several issues have been attributed to the 1996 budgetary action. Legislators, the public, and some agents had become confused as to whether or not MG volunteers are Extension clientele. Agents with MG management responsibilities had focused a significant amount of their efforts on this select group of people in return for assistance in implementing educational programs within the community. Some agents, feeling as Florida does that “the volunteers are customers of and very visible ambassadors for (Extension)” (Ruppert et al, 1997), had taken efforts to satisfy this vocal group that had a history of influencing budget decisions. Any individual who applied to the program had been accepted, trained, and provided with continued education and one-on-one information regardless of whether or not they could or would volunteer for Extension. The quantity of warm bodies in training classes had become far more important in some local programs than the quality of the volunteer and their willingness and ability to further VCE’s mission.

Additionally, confusion had developed over the role of the MG volunteer. Through the years, the role of the MG volunteer has changed from “answer(ing) repetitive, easily answered questions by phone or in person” to “involvement in proactive and community-oriented ventures” (Ruppert et al, 1997). In many cases, effective educational programs for the community have resulted. However, increased liberties with volunteer jobs has resulted in MG volunteering in jobs outside

of Extension's education mission, such as becoming free garden labor. With volunteer jobs shifting away from VCE's educational mission (i.e., weed pulling), the expected programmatic return for VCE was not always satisfactory. Bobbitt (1997) pointed out that the MG program must express a clear mission of education. "MGs are trained to be grassroots educators," serving many diverse audiences, and relating to "the larger issues facing society—environmental quality, crime prevention, food security, strong neighborhoods, and healthy, capable children." Without this purpose driving the MG program, the program would "be viewed as little more than a glorified garden club and not worthy of support" (Bobbitt, 1997).

The 1996 budgetary events provided the perfect opportunity to refocus the purpose of the VCE MG program. The Office of Environmental Horticulture (OEH), directed by the state Extension Environmental Horticulture specialist and housing the state MG coordinator and other staff, took leadership in redirecting the MG program, focusing on MG volunteers as educational partners with and nonpaid staff of VCE. Emphasis was placed on the role of MGs as volunteer educators whose purpose was to conduct educational programs for their local communities. It was further emphasized that the VCE MG program's purpose was not to provide in-depth horticulture education for gardeners who simply wanted to be educated.

The restructuring based on local MG coordinators was new and confusing for volunteer and paid staff alike. Coordinators needed information, guidance, and suggestions for meeting their new management responsibilities. Sixty-five percent of local coordinators were MG volunteers, the majority of which had neither knowledge of managing a volunteer program, nor clear understanding of VCE and the appropriate educational role of MG volunteers. They were familiar with the MG training program from the volunteer perspective, but had no experience managing the program or planning public educational programs for the community. Misunderstanding by agents and middle administration regarding the management change of MG created a shift in attitude such that some agents who previously worked closely with MG programs were unwilling to talk to MG volunteers, even for public education program implementation, an element of the MG program that was acknowledged and encouraged by VCE throughout the transition. OEH led

efforts to prepare the new local coordinators for their jobs as MG program managers and to ensure that everyone understood the purpose and focus of the VCE MG program through revision of MG program policies, development of new volunteer materials, establishment of a MG team, new management guidelines, in-service training for coordinators, an administrative website, an electronic discussion list for coordinators, a refocused state MG newsletter, and training sessions with VCE administrators and district and unit directors.

VCE MG PROGRAM POLICIES

The management changes required a formal set of VCE MG program policies to be applied throughout the state with oversight authority from the state MG coordinator and state Extension specialist. Prior to 1996, policies were developed and mutually agreed upon by agents, but had no university or VCE administrative approval, and thus lacked authority for compliance with the exception of the pesticide policy issued by the University's Chemical, Drug, and Pesticide Unit. Because Extension agents function with a great degree of autonomy in their unit offices, the authority for local MG program management needed to be transitioned to the new system of local MG coordinators. The revised VCE MG Program Policies (1997) with VCE administrative approval was the first step in providing authority to the new coordinators in Virginia MG programs. To revise the policies, a series of meetings in November 1996 were conducted and coordinators (agents, non-agents, and volunteers) were invited to review the proposed policies and participate in any revision. The new policies were completed and reviewed and approved by VCE administration in February 1997. The new policies set forth minimum standards and protocol for recruitment, training, volunteer time, MG volunteer projects, and other topics (<http://www.ext.vt.edu/vce/specialty/envirohort/mastergard/master.html>).

NEW VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT MATERIALS

Changes in the program direction and policies required informing and educating all MG volunteers and VCE staff across the state regarding the new standards. This involved rewriting the volunteer orientation materials included in the *Virginia Master Gardener Handbook* (Relf, 1994). Originally, resources from the *VCE MG Management Guide* (Schwab and Relf, 1989) had been expanded and incorporated into the *Virginia Master Gardener Handbook*. A brief synopsis of Cooperative Extension; volunteer job descriptions; instructions for speaking to the public about horticulture; and materials available for use, such as slide sets, videos, and publications, were included in the volunteer section of the training handbook. The new version of the chapter further explains the mission statement of VCE, the role of the MG in meeting VCE's goals, the Environmental Horticulture Plan of Work, VCE MG program organization, and basic volunteer responsibilities, such as fulfilling volunteer commitments in approved VCE projects and programs and remaining a VCE MG. Revised materials were included in the *Virginia Master Gardener Handbook* as well as being printed as a numbered VCE publication #426-699, *Welcome to Virginia Master Gardening!* (Dorn and Relf, 1998a). These materials were distributed in draft form in August 1997, with final printing in January 1998.

THE MASTER GARDENER TEAM

A problem-solving and planning team, referred to as the MG Team, was also developed in 1997. This team was originally created to work with the state Master Gardener coordinator in identifying and resolving the problems resulting from the 1996 shift in management. In its first year, the team was instrumental in initiating the VCE MG administrative website, contributing to the development of the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual* (Dorn and Relf, 1998b), and planning MG College, a special advanced-training opportunity extended to active VCE MGS held annually on the campus of Virginia Tech. More recently, the team has addressed: ● risk management issues facing MG programs by developing two training slide sets for coordinators (Reilly and Carter, 1998a and 1998b); ● volunteer recognition tools, such as VCE nametags and

service awards; and ● educational programming across VCE program areas, such as 4-H and Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS). The MG team continues on a year-to-year basis, identifying new individuals who will bring unique and valuable perspectives to the team's discussions. Team representatives include locally funded agents, state-funded agents (Environmental Horticulture, 4-H, and FCS), locally funded nonagent coordinators, volunteer coordinators, MG volunteers, and representatives of the Virginia Master Gardener Association (VMGA).

NEW MANAGEMENT GUIDELINES

The new volunteer management materials provided coordinators and MG trainees with basic MG program requirements. However, to implement these requirements, it was clearly evident that coordinators still needed instruction on developing MG programs that will provide positive, structured roles for volunteers that meet the mission and goals of VCE. The existing *Virginia Master Gardener Management Guide* (Schwab and Relf, 1989), similar to others nationally, was a 28-page document that presented summaries of management theories with few samples for local program managers to use. This publication was no longer effective at addressing the issues of new local MG coordinators with their increase in responsibility and authority.

A new management guide, the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual* (Dorn and Relf, 1998b), was developed cooperatively with teams of MG volunteers, local coordinators, agents, and paid VCE staff to build structure and uniformity in MG program management across the state of Virginia and to enhance the effectiveness of the local coordinator. The management topics identified by this group ranged from recruiting for predetermined job descriptions to recognition procedures for volunteers. Contemporary volunteer management topics were researched to provide the basis for the new management guide. Local MG programs were asked for samples of letters, tests, training outlines, and procedures that were used to manage their MG programs for inclusion in the coordinator's manual. The MG Team reviewed the existing management guide, the volunteer chapter in the *Handbook*, and an outline for MG program policies and guidelines

that were developed in 1993 by a team of 12 agents, volunteers, and state-level staff. Pertinent information served as the basis for development and new sections were added to reflect the current management situation. The mission of VCE, its Environmental Horticulture Plan of Work and related importance of record keeping and reporting, and the role of the Extension agent and the local MG coordinator were fully explained as part of the management guidelines to provide coordinators with a clear understanding and the information to train MG volunteers. As the manual was developed, sections were reviewed by the MG Team for applicability. A 14-chapter draft version was completed in March 1998 (see Table 1 for table of contents).

IN-SERVICE TRAINING FOR LOCAL COORDINATORS

Local Master Gardener coordinator training sessions are conducted annually to review MG program management. The MG Team helped to make the decision that coordinator training will be held annually in June, just prior to MG College. Because the majority of coordinators are volunteer positions that experience yearly turnover through re-election, it is necessary to have an annual training event to familiarize these individuals with their jobs and the resources available to assist them. The MG Team advised that June was an appropriate time for the training, as most local officer elections occurred in the spring and new coordinators would be in place to participate in a June training. Other regional training opportunities are offered as need arises.

VCE MG PROGRAM ADMINISTRATIVE WEBSITE

An administrative website on the VCE Intranet was developed for use by local coordinators and VCE administrators. The website includes current VCE Master Gardener program policies; educational resources, such as lists of slide sets, video tapes, and publications, that can be used to train Master Gardeners and educate the general public; a calendar of events reflecting possible recertification training opportunities for MG volunteers; frequently asked management questions and their answers; past issues of the *Virginia Master Gardener Leadership Development*

Newsletter; and other timely pieces of information, such as conference registration announcements and forms, teaching tools, and articles.

VCE-MGC COORDINATOR LISTSERV

To facilitate direct communication between the state and local MG coordinators, an electronic discussion list, a “listserv,” was instituted. Coordinator’s personal or unit office e-mail addresses are subscribed to the list, which is updated as coordinator changes occur. The state coordinator uses the list to send information in a timely manner, such as recertification training opportunities; grant applications; or reminder of management tasks, such as submitting MG service awards.

THE STATE MG NEWSLETTER MESSAGE

To reinforce the change in expectations of MGs, the state-wide newsletter for MG volunteers, the *Virginia Master Gardener Leadership Development Newsletter*, edited by the state MG coordinator, was refocused on topics that developed leadership skills in its readers. Past issues of the newsletter were used as recognition tools, praising individuals for accomplishments. Since 1996, the newsletter has focused on the role of MG volunteers in leading educational programs in Virginia communities. It regularly includes resources available for MGs to do their jobs, such as grants, publications, and web sites; examples of educational programs currently conducted by VCE MGs; program administrative information, such as planning for the Advanced MG stewardship series; and a calendar of events that lists recertification training opportunities. Each individual who trains as a VCE MG receives a complimentary subscription to the newsletter as long as the individual remains an active MG.

TOOLS TO TRAIN MG VOLUNTEERS

Tools to train MG volunteers are available to local coordinators. The *Virginia Master Gardener Handbook* is the base text for initial training, covering 16 horticulture topics and volunteerism.

Slide sets and video tapes are available on loan to supplement the training manual. Opportunities to support retention of volunteers include MG College, advanced training offered annually at the university; the Advanced Master Gardener Stewardship series, such as Master Gardener—Tree Steward (Day et al, 1996) and Master Gardener—Water Steward (Dorn et al, 1997); and regional training supported by OEH.

FUTURE MANAGEMENT TOOLS

Additional support for local MG program management is under development. An Internet-based record keeping and reporting system, designed by a special project team of agents, volunteers, and the state MG coordinator, is being developed. The new system will facilitate record keeping for individual volunteers as well as MG projects, reinforce the connection of MG projects to VCE's Environmental Horticulture Plan of Work, and place responsibility on VCE agents to incorporate MG accomplishments in VCE's annual reports.

The MG Team has identified the need for tools to enable the MG coordinators to more effectively train MG on how to implement educational programs. Providing subject matter training is only the first step in allowing MGs to carry educational programs to the public.

EVALUATION OF MANAGEMENT TOOLS

In an evaluation survey, respondents ranked the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual* as the most helpful tool in restructuring the local MG program, followed in order of helpfulness by MG coordinator training sessions, follow-up consultation with the state MG coordinator and/or state Extension specialist, and finally the VCE Master Gardener administrative website (Table 2). These results are as expected, as the manual is a hands-on reference that is always available for immediate consultation. As noted in Table 2, not all individuals evaluating the manual (i.e., those who have started a brand new MG program since July 1, 1998) have participated in a coordinator training session. Also, the website is not as popular a resource because all coordinators are not

Internet users and because the site does not contain as much information or implementation examples as the manual. While consultation with the state coordinator is an option for many coordinators, it is sometimes difficult to schedule a consultation and this type of appointment lacks the benefit of interacting with other coordinators experiencing similar situations as group training provides.

CONCLUSIONS

In 1996, there were 2500 active MG volunteers in 39 MG programs spread throughout 67 of 107 unit offices in Virginia. Even with a major shift in management that occurred in 1996, the VCE MG program continues to grow. In 1999, there are 2700 MG volunteers in 45 MG programs spread through 76 of 107 VCE unit offices. Each office trains and retains fewer volunteers, but coordinators are working more effectively with MGs.

The VCE MG web page, *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual*, the MG Team, the refocused *Virginia Master Gardener Leadership Development Newsletter*, and additional MG management training tools have been developed to assist and support a structured program management approach that focuses on local MG coordinators and their relationship to VCE staff, agents, and specialists, and the overall health of the VCE MG program. Future focus will address the role of MG volunteers as trainers and assist local coordinators in training MG to implement educational programs in cooperation with all VCE agents.

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Table 1. Table of Contents of the 1998 *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual*

CHAPTER	TITLE
1.	The Local MG Coordinator
2.	Virginia Tech Affiliation
3.	Getting Started for the First Time
4.	Designing and Implementing Educational Programs
	VCE Publication 426-699 Welcome to Virginia Master Gardening!
6.	Establishing Responsibilities of Master Gardeners
7.	Developing Skills and Knowledge
8.	Recruiting and Selecting Prospective VCE Master Gardeners
9.	Training: Preparing VCE MGs for Their Jobs
10.	Ensuring Continued Growth
11.	Promoting VCE MG Programs
12.	Managing Resources
13.	Evaluating the MG Program
14.	Record Keeping and Reporting

Table 2. Helpfulness of tools in assisting local coordinator with MG program management as evaluated by local coordinators

TOOL	N^z	% SATISFACTION^y
Manual	39	92.3
Training ^x	35	80.0
Consultation	33	78.8
Website	34	55.9

^z N represents the number of responses to the particular question. The changes in N reflect those respondents who selected not to answer the question.

^y Individuals responded to a scale of 1 to 4, with two answers representing acceptable levels and two not acceptable levels. Percent effective or important was determined by adding the frequency percentages of the two acceptable levels.

^x Two respondents who started new MG programs where none existed previously have not participated in a formal training session.